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ABSTRACT

A multiple-case study examined how schools and community human-services agencies collaborate to meet the needs of at-risk youth in two rural Oregon counties. Four youth services teams (YST) were composed of approximately 10 members each, representing local public schools, county social and health services agencies, and local law enforcement units. Teams received referrals of high-risk youth, met with each referred student and interested others (parents, school staff, caseworker), and developed an action plan for the student. Observations of YST meetings and interviews with YST members and selected school personnel examined the formation, structure, and outcomes of collaborations. With regard to formation, results indicate that: (1) the presence of a shared problem provided the impetus to collaborate; (2) there was no apparent advantage in having administrators versus direct-service staff act as conveners; and (3) failure to include representatives of all stakeholder groups early in the process led to misunderstandings and frustrations with YST work. Findings with regard to structure were: (1) the failure to clearly define and agree upon objectives, roles, and responsibilities hampered YST efforts; (2) the education sector supplied most of the leadership and administrative support; (3) one organization typically served as the "fixer" to facilitate the process of collaboration; and (4) an organization's inkind contribution of personnel was often, in reality, an individual's contribution of personal time. Outcomes included improved communication between schools and community agencies, and increased access to community services for at-risk youth. (Author/SV)

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School-Community Agency Collaboration in Rural Settings

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School-Community Agency Collaboration in Rural Settings

Abstract

A multiple-case study was conducted to address the question, how do schools and community human service agencies collaborate to meet the needs of at-risk youth. The interorganizational relationships present within four Oregon youth services teams formed the focus of the research. This paper presents those findings generated by the study that relate to the following subquestions: how were the collaborations formed, what is their structure, and what are the outcomes. With regard to the formation of the collaborations it was found that: (1) the presence of a shared problem provided the impetus to collaborate; (2) there was no apparent advantage in having administrators versus direct service staff act as conveners; and (3) failure to include representatives of all critical stakeholder groups early in the process led to misunderstandings and frustrations with the work of the teams. With regard to the structure of the collaborations, findings indicated that: (1) the failure to clearly define and agree upon objectives and related roles and responsibilities posed serious challenges to the teams' efforts; (2) although team membership included representatives of schools, community agencies, and law enforcement units, the education sector was relied upon to provide the majority of the leadership and administrative support; (3) one of the involved organizations served as a "fixer", specifically providing support to facilitate the process of collaboration itself; and (4) in many instances, the organization's inkind contribution of personnel was, in reality, a contribution made by the individual team member. Two outcomes were identified: (1) communication between schools and community agencies was noticeably improved; and (2) at-risk students were helped to identify and gain access to needed community services.

SCHOOL-COMMUNITY AGENCY COLLABORATION IN RURAL SETTINGS

Within the last decade, collaboration has increasingly been identified as a preferred strategy for finding solutions to the problems faced by at-risk youth (Melaville, Blank, & Asayesh, 1993). Schools and human service organizations have become keenly aware that unilateral efforts can not meet the complex needs of these youth. The interrelatedness of economic, social, and educational risk factors such as poverty, substance abuse, minority status, poor achievement, etc., demands a community-based, comprehensive response. One viable strategy to effect that response is collaboration.

Collaboration refers to a joint effort undertaken by two or more agencies to solve a problem that no one agency can solve alone (Gray, 1985). It may be viewed as an "ongoing meeting between and among schools, state agencies, state and local government, and community organizations to resolve a common problem" (Rodriguez, McQuaid, & Rosauer, 1988 p. 1) or more simply, as a group of individuals working together focused on a common goal.

Although educators and other service providers are undertaking collaborative efforts in increasing numbers (Kagan, Rivera, & Parker, 1991; Melaville, Blank, & Asayesh, 1993; Thomas, English, & Biskel, 1993), there is limited information about these collaborations: how they are initiated, what form they take, and how they carry out their tasks (Kagan, 1991; Liberman, 1986). The study reported here was conducted to add to our knowledge and understanding of how public schools and community human service agencies collaborate to provide more effective services for at-risk youth.

Interorganizational Relations

The working relationships between otherwise autonomous organizations have been the subject of study for a number of decades, beginning in the 1960's. Research traditions of varying disciplines have framed the research, and a number of different forms of interorganizational linkage have been identified, collaboration being one of them (Whetten, 1981). Much of the research on interorganizational collaboration to date has been criticized as too narrowly focused, failing to capture the multiple effects of collaboration or to present the viewpoints of clients or staff members of the system under investigation. Additionally, the research has been criticized for its failure to reflect the evolutionary nature of the relationships (Flynn & Harbin, 1987; Rogers & Whetten, 1982).

In response to these criticisms, studies utilizing whole systems as the unit of analysis have begun to emerge (Cummings, 1984; Lawless & Moore, 1989). One model that reflects the whole systems approach is Gray's (1985) domain-based, process-oriented model of interorganizational collaboration. Under this model, the focus is on the problem domain or the unit made up of the various organizations that join together to address a common issue. This orientation represents a shift from previous work that focused on a particular organization and the way it related to others. The problem domain constitutes an entity in and of itself, separate from any one organization (McCann, 1983). It represents a collective rather than an individual response to a problem that cannot be adequately addressed by a single organization.

Unlike other cross-sectional approaches to the study of interorganizational relationships, Gray's approach is process-oriented, concerned with the formation and development of collaborative relationships within an organizational domain. It is based on the three phases of social problem solving proposed by McCann (1983): problem-setting, direction-setting, and structuring. Adopting McCann's structure as the three developmental stages of collaboration, Gray expanded the framework

by identifying the conditions at each stage that facilitate successful collaboration. Although the three phases are sequential, they may overlap to varying degrees.

Problem-setting, stage one, involves the identification of stakeholders within a domain and their appreciation of their interdependence. Important to success at this stage is the inclusion of a broad range of stakeholders who are perceived to have a legitimate interest in the problem, a degree of recognized interdependence among stakeholders, positive expectations, and a convener who is recognized as having the legitimate authority to act as the organizer.

The second stage of development is direction-setting. At this stage, stakeholders develop a shared vision of the future. Shared values and the dispersion of power among members promote direction-setting.

The third and final developmental stage, structuring, consists of formalizing relations between stakeholders as a way to sustain their joint activities. Structuring is enhanced by the close physical proximity of the stakeholders and adequate time to work through negotiations for the design of the structure.

Gray's model provides one way of approaching the study of interorganizational collaboration. It is an alternative which appears to have some merit in fostering our understanding of school-agency collaboration.

School-Community Agency Collaboration

Research that relates specifically to the collaboration of schools and human services agencies as a strategy for meeting the needs of at-risk youth may be seen as a subset of research on interorganizational relations. It has only recently emerged as a serious research topic, beginning to appear in the literature consistently in the mid-1980's. Understandably, it constitutes a limited data base. There have been several evaluation studies of school-agency collaboration (Murray, Bourque, & Mileff, 1981; Orr, 1989; Philliber & Swift, 1991; Yale Bush Center in Child Development and Social

Policy, 1991); however, in all but one, an evaluation of program impact was either not attempted or was found to be premature. Orr's study was the exception. In his evaluation of the Los Angeles Focus on Youth Project, Orr found that junior high school and senior high school students enrolled in the project had significantly lower dropout rates than their school peers who did not participate.

The remaining school-agency collaboration research has been largely exploratory, yielding descriptive data (Faddoul, 1989; Firestone & Drew, 1987; Levy & Copple, 1989; Melaville & Blank, 1991; Melaville, Blank, & Asayesh, 1993; Rodriguez, McQuaid, & Rosauer, 1988; Robinson & Mastny, 1989). The findings have primarily consisted of identified factors that facilitate collaboration, identified barriers to collaboration, and the preliminary outcomes of collaboration. Those factors identified as facilitative included a shared vision, support from top level administrators as well as from those who deliver services, involvement of all stakeholders early in the process, realistic time frames, strong effective leadership, adequate resources, and above all, flexibility. Barriers to collaboration were identified as inflexible organizational policies and procedures, limited financial resources, lack of vision, turf issues, and a lack of information and understanding among participants regarding the various organizations involved. Preliminary outcomes of collaboration were noted to include improved access to services, the development of new services, a broader base of community support, and increased communication among organizations.

Two studies, one by Barron (1983), and the other by Kagan, Rivera, and Parker (1991) reflected some of the previously noted findings and also contributed significant additional insight. In Barron's study of the Madison Park Collaborative in Boston, the role of "the fixer" emerged as critical to the implementation of the collaborative effort. Someone was needed to help keep communications open among participants and to assist with the allocation of resources. Knowledge of both sides, that is, of schools and agencies, was found to be a crucial factor in the success of "the fixer."

Barron also found that it was important to clearly define the objectives of the collaboration and the manner in which they would be achieved. Ambiguity as to how the actual implementation of the program of services would be carried out created obstacles to the sharing of responsibility.

One of the variables of collaboration examined by Kagan et al. (1991) in a nationwide survey of collaborations, was the role of leadership. Like other studies referred to previously, the importance of a strong, effective leader was confirmed. However, the study called into question the necessity of shared leadership within a collaboration. Most of the surveyed collaborations depended, in the final analysis, on a particular person to provide leadership. Although there was evidence that shared leadership can provide effective direction, it was not shown to be more advantageous than other models of leadership. This finding contradicts the recommendations for a shared model of leadership found in some of the literature (Gamm as cited in Kagan, 1991; Melaville, Blank, & Asayesh, 1993).

It is clear that the research base in the field of school-community agency collaboration is limited. Furthermore, much of what is known is based on experiences in urban settings. Barron (1983), Gray and Wood (1991), Kagan (1991) and others have all called for further research to expand the knowledge base in this rather underdeveloped field. The study that is the subject of this paper was undertaken to answer the question, how do schools and community agencies collaborate to meet the needs of at-risk youth? Specifically, it sought to describe and analyze voluntary collaborations in rural settings. Four subquestions guided the study: 1) Why and how was the collaboration initiated?, 2) What is the structure of the collaboration?, 3) What are the characteristics of the process?, and 4) What are the outcomes of the process?

Methods

The nature of the research question called for an exploratory and descriptive approach. A qualitative, multiple-case study design was chosen as the research design because the open-ended,

inductive characteristics of the design, which emphasize understanding of process, matched the objectives of the study.

Subjects

Four youth services teams (YST) located in two rural Oregon counties were selected for the study. The teams were nominated by state education and human services administrators as promising examples of school-community agency collaboration, and, on closer examination, were found to meet researcher-established criteria as ongoing, information-rich examples of collaboration. The four teams represented voluntary interagency efforts undertaken by local schools and community-based agencies to address the needs of at-risk youth through a collaborative staffing process. The teams had no designated funding and thus relied on in-kind contributions from member organizations for their resource base. They varied in years of operation, from one to six years; in the size of the school districts they served, from 248 to 7600 students; and in location, two were located in county seats, two were not.

On average, the teams were composed of ten members appointed by local public schools, county social and health services agencies, and local law enforcement units. Team meetings were regularly scheduled once or twice a month and were facilitated by a team member who was designated the team coordinator.

The teams followed a defined process consisting of three sequential steps: referral, staffing, and implementation (see Figure 1). School and agency personnel submitted student referrals to the YST by completing formal paperwork which included a form authorizing the release and exchange of information and a referral form that provided pertinent student data, an explanation of the current problem situation, and actions taken previously to address the problem. Upon receipt of the paperwork, the team coordinator scheduled a staffing. At the staffing, the referring person and involved others (parents, school staff, caseworker) met with the YST to present information. Team

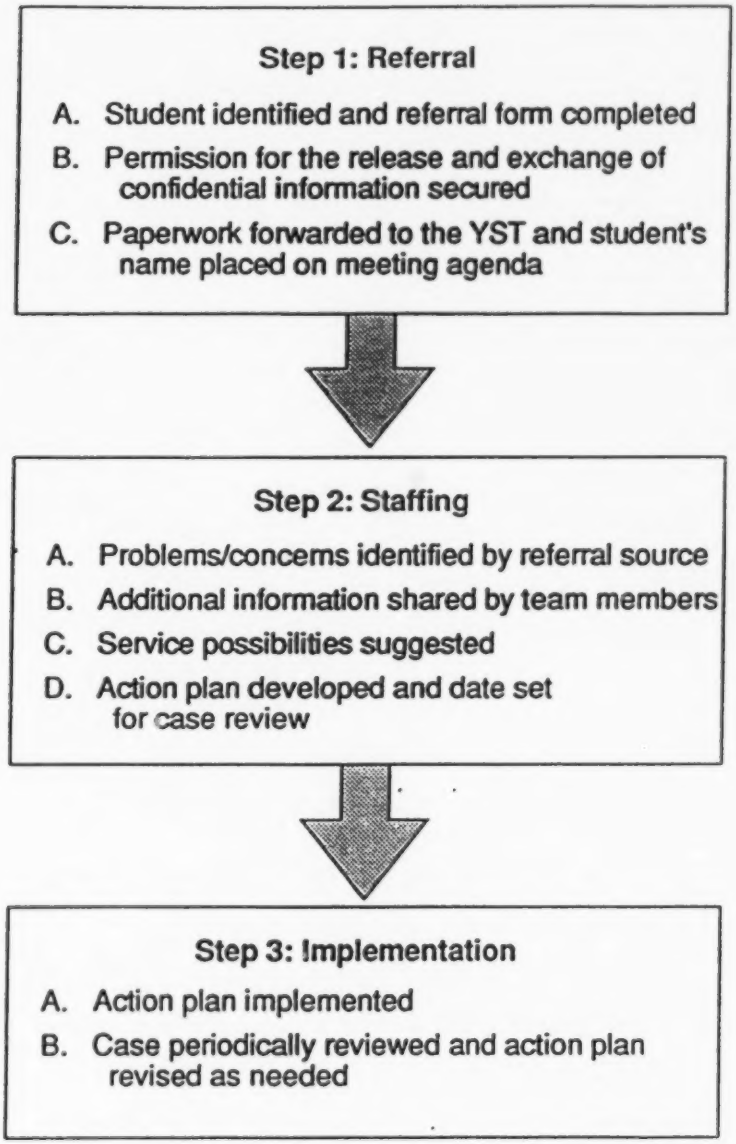
Step 1: Referral
A. Student identified and referral form completed
B. Permission for the release and exchange of confidential information secured
C. Paperwork forwarded to the YST and student's name placed on meeting agenda
Step 2: Staffing
A. Problems/concerns identified by referral source
B. Additional information shared by team members
C. Service possibilities suggested
D. Action plan developed and date set for case review
Step 3: Implementation
A. Action plan implemented
B. Case periodically reviewed and action plan revised as needed

Figure 1. Sequence of steps in the youth services team process.

members also shared relevant information they possessed, and then the entire group explored alternatives for dealing with the situation and developed a plan of action for the student. Progress made in implementing the plan was assessed periodically and changes made in the plan as needed.

Data Collection

Data were collected between March and June of 1992 using interviews, observations, and document review. A pilot study was conducted in February of 1992 to allow refinement of data collection procedures. The majority of the data were collected through the use of two interviewing procedures. A structured interview format was employed in telephone interviews with 43 school counselors. Six questions related to the counselor's familiarity and experience with a YST comprised the interview format. A semistructured interview guide was used in the person-to-person interviews conducted with 50 YST members and selected school personnel. Questions were related to the four research questions; however, the interviews varied based on the background and experience of the respondents. Field notes were made of the telephone interviews, and the personal interviews were audiotaped and later transcribed verbatim.

Two other primary sources of qualitative data were observation and document review. Observations of YST meetings were carried out to gather firsthand information about the teams in action. The observations centered on the activities and interactions of the individuals in attendance, and field notes were used to systematically record the observations. Documents in the form of printed material and videotape were reviewed to gain yet additional information and understanding. The documents were all produced independent of the research and consisted of the records of meetings, the formal agreements and bylaws of the teams, and other miscellaneous documents associated with the YSTs. All data were collected by the same researcher and with the informed consent of participants. The researcher had no previous or other ongoing involvement with the teams.

Data Analysis

The analysis of the data proceeded inductively using a content analysis strategy. Initial data analysis occurred simultaneously with data collection, and indeed informed the collection. However, the more intensive, concentrated analysis and interpretation of the data was reserved until the data collection phase was largely completed. Then, through the use of a coding strategy and data displays (Miles & Huberman, 1984), themes were identified and conclusions drawn and verified based on the preponderance of supporting evidence. This paper presents those findings that pertain to the formation and structuring of the youth services teams and those related to the outcomes achieved by the teams.

Results and Discussion

Formation of the Collaborations

As explained by Gray (1985), the problem domain is made up of individuals and organizations that share a common problem or concern. In the case of the four YSTs, the teams coalesced around the need to improve services for at-risk youth. There was a common perception among school and agency personnel that youth at risk were not receiving the level of service that they needed. Services were either unavailable or were delivered in a piecemeal fashion that constrained effectiveness.

It was the awareness of unmet needs rather than an external mandate that prompted conveners to initiate efforts to form school-agency collaborations. Their efforts to bring stakeholders together proceeded based on informal authority. In two cases, the conveners were school district administrators who first approached agency administrators about the possibility of collaborative problem-solving. Once administrators committed to the idea, direct service staff were brought into the planning.

In the other two cases, direct service agency personnel and school district special services staff who were already involved in informal interagency efforts served as conveners, with the approval of school and agency administrators. Again, the position and experience of the conveners conveyed legitimacy as did administrative endorsement. Although a core group acted as the conveners,

education staff took the lead in organizing the efforts. Thus, early leadership for all four teams came from the education sector.

There was no indication that either a top-down or bottom-up approach was more advantageous in terms of team formation and subsequent functioning. It was acknowledged, however, that both administrative and line staff support were necessary to implement the collaborative effort.

A major step in team formation was the identification of stakeholders. Schools, youth serving agencies, and law enforcement units were easily identifiable and their participation was invited. There were, however, two stakeholder groups that were not involved in the initial planning, parents and classroom teachers.

Deprived of critical input from parents and classroom teachers, the teams initially overlooked issues that subsequently had to be addressed. First, the teams were not sensitive to the amount of attention and support parents required to enable them to be contributing members of the YST process. Appearing before a team of school and agency officials was very intimidating for parents, and they were reluctant to participate on their own. Second, the teams were not aware of the expectations that classroom teachers and school counselors had of the process. It was found that school district central staff members, who represented the schools in the YST planning process, did not necessarily reflect perceptions found at the local building level, and this contributed to conflicting expectations and some disenchantment with the outcomes of the YST process. Both these stakeholder groups eventually were represented on the teams, but had they been so initially, much hesitancy, frustration, and miscommunication would have been eliminated. The importance of thinking broadly in defining the problem domain was clearly demonstrated (Gray, 1985).

Once a core of stakeholders was identified, conversations intensified among participants as to the need to collaborate and what the end result of such collaboration should be. Ongoing conversations about the values and goals of individuals and organizations and a sharing of information

about related policies and procedures led to increased understanding and the development of trust among stakeholders. Through the process, a shared vision of the future was developed. Key phrases from team vision statements included "cooperation and understanding between participating agencies", "coordinated community-based delivery of services for at-risk youth", "enhanced service delivery", and "facilitated access to cooperating agencies and community resources." In essence, the vision was one of improved services for at-risk youth accomplished through the pooling of school and agency resources and efforts.

Structuring of the Collaborations

Each of the youth services teams formalized their intentions to collaborate through the signing of an interagency memorandum of understanding. These agreements contained very general language which articulated the vision of the effort but provided few specifics as to how the vision would be accomplished. For two of the teams, the agreements did no more than to specify that each of the member organizations would designate personnel to serve as team members. The agreements for the other two teams were a bit more detailed. For each of these teams, a school representative was designated as team coordinator, and an annual schedule for YST meetings was established. This loose structuring reflected a perceived sense of low interdependence among the organizations (Gray, 1985). They could agree that they shared a common concern, and they could agree to collaborate through the YST, but otherwise they remained largely isolated, each performing its identified mission. One outcome of the loose structuring was that team members set about their work without benefit of specifically defined objectives or a clear understanding of related roles and responsibilities. These issues had to be resolved after the teams began their work.

Objectives. The lack of defined objectives caused misunderstandings and a degree of discomfort for some school personnel. One of the first questions that arose out of the ambiguity was who should initiate student referrals to the team? The overwhelming majority of referrals were made

by teachers and counselors. Few agency staff members brought cases to the teams' attention. Over time, some school personnel came to view the YST not as a school-agency team but as an agency council that existed to give advice to school staff. One educator, who was also a team member, expressed the feeling this way:

> The kids belong to everybody. They don't belong to the school, and everybody else tries to fix them. If the agencies brought referrals, then we could be resources to help, and it would make a different feel: that we are all on equal footing instead of us begging for help. That would be much more like a team.

Other school personnel expressed hesitancy to air "in-house" problems before the team, especially when agency staff never brought problems. In addition, the failure of agencies to refer to the teams was interpreted by some educators as a lack of respect for the expertise of school teachers and counselors. One school administrator reflected, "It is sort of like we can't be trusted, we aren't professionals. I don't understand why they [agencies] feel they can help, but we can't."

Agency administrators and staff did not indicate any feelings of superiority or lack of appreciation for the work of educators. The agencies supported the YST concept and were willing to participate as team members, but they found little reason to make referrals. Unlike the schools, they were already linked with established interagency networks, and staff were hesitant to vary from familiar procedures. A desire for new ideas or a need to coordinate treatment among several organizations were the prime motivators for agencies to use the YST, and these needs arose infrequently.

A second source of tension that arose with regard to objectives involved differing expectations as to what kind of cases the teams were meant to staff. Schools tended to primarily refer only students who were in a state of crisis, ones for whom the school had exhausted its resources. Team members pointed out the limitations placed on the YST process by such cases. In many instances, the

students were already involved with community services, and there was little else that the team could offer. Team members felt that they were better able to serve students who were just beginning to show evidence of problems. Steps for early intervention could be coordinated and multiple resources brought to bear when they might have a chance to make a difference and prevent escalation of the problem. Where schools and teams differed on the definition of appropriate cases for referral, school referrals decreased in number.

The issues of who should refer and what kind of referrals should be made were problematic for all teams, although to varying degrees depending on how much opinions differed. The teams did work to openly address the issues, and greater understanding of positions, though not consensus, resulted.

Roles and Responsibilities. Related to the uncertainty about objectives was a lack of common understanding regarding the roles and responsibilities of team membership. This finding affirmed Barron's (1983) conclusion that the lack of clearly defined objectives made it difficult to share responsibility among collaboration members. As noted previously, the memorandums of agreement did little more than specify that member organizations would name a representative to the team. All team members recognized their responsibility to participate in YST meetings; however, they viewed it as "extra duty", beyond their regular workload. "I see it [YST] as providing service to the community. It has a value, but I don't see it as part of my job." When conflicts arose between team meetings and other job-related demands, the YST did not necessarily take precedence.

While members agreed that the YST constituted extra responsibilities, they differed in their definition of exactly what those extra responsibilities were. One area of controversy was whether a member's role was advisory in nature, or whether it was more associated with providing direct service. One position held that the role of team members was to provide information to help develop a plan of action for referred students. This entailed reviewing agency or school records for pertinent

information and sharing it with the team and also participating in brainstorming to develop options for service. Other team members felt they should additionally have a direct role in the implementation of action plans, taking responsibility for specific tasks. The latter course of action was the one wanted and expected by most school staff who made referrals.

For those members who did volunteer to complete tasks related to plan implementation, follow-through many times proved difficult. Limited time was the greatest impediment. The organizational in-kind contribution of support for the YST was primarily a contribution of personnel. Yet, because appointed staff did not have their work load reduced otherwise, that in-kind contribution actually reflected the personal contribution of the individual member. Thus, as explained by one team member, often there simply wasn't enough time to adequately follow through on tasks:

> I wish there was more time for follow-through. I usually feel real good about the teaming of the situation, and then I guess I feel as alienated as the child and the family does. When push comes to shove, there really isn't enough time and resources to see it through.

Another factor in the lack of follow-through by team members was the lack of accountability. A team coordinator explained, "If someone hasn't followed through, it is just passed over. It is not uncomfortable enough for people who don't do their piece." School and agency administrators did not supervise staff as they carried out YST duties, and the team coordinators had no authority to hold people accountable for their commitments. They could do little more than bring the situation to the attention of the team or take it upon themselves to pick up loose ends. The latter happened quite frequently.

School pressure placed on teams to shoulder some responsibility for the follow-through on action plans and the fact that initial attempts to do so were largely ineffective led the teams to search for alternatives. Out of the search efforts came a plan for case management funded with outside grants. One of the teams was successful in funding a team case manager position which then freed

team members to fulfill their role as planners, a role they could carry out, and relieved them of responsibilities for implementing the action plans, a role they had found difficult to achieve. The other three teams did not find outside funding, and they continued to try to balance both roles with limited success.

Leadership. Another issue related to roles and responsibilities was that of team leadership. All four teams had one member who was designated the team coordinator. In three of the four cases the coordinator was an educator. For those three coordinators, the leadership role included receiving the paperwork tied to the referral process, setting the agenda, facilitating YST meetings, writing and distributing minutes of YST meetings, and helping school personnel with the referral process. It also included a good deal of follow-up on team action plans. In the fourth instance, the coordinator was a mental health counselor. His coordinator role consisted only of facilitating the team meetings. The local school district provided support personnel to receive the referrals and set the agenda as well as to take and distribute minutes of the meetings.

Thus, in essence, the leadership for all the teams was provided by the schools. At first this was not a problem, but as years passed and other agencies did not volunteer to share coordination duties, the burden on the schools became significant. In the case of the YSTs, leadership was not related to authority and control: there was no advantage to being in the coordinator position. Essentially, leadership meant increased responsibility, and organizations, other than the school, were unwilling to invest the additional resources that were required. School personnel talked about a vision of shared leadership, but this vision was not echoed by any of the agency staff. By default, the leadership role fell to the schools. The lack of willingness to assume the leadership role adds additional perspective to Kagan's (1991) questioning of the importance of shared leadership in collaboration. It also raises questions about the relationship between leadership roles and resource demand.

The "Fixer." In the course of their functioning, the teams were significantly assisted by the efforts of team members associated with the regional educational service agency (ESA). At least one consultant from the ESA Student Services Program served on each team. These individuals had all worked in social service agencies before coming to their positions with the ESA, and thus they possessed an understanding of both sectors. They used their knowledge and understanding to facilitate the collaborative process. They worked with individual school staff to assist with referrals, helped the teams establish record keeping procedures, and in one case, a consultant served as team coordinator. They also sponsored trainings for team members to promote team building, and they helped to develop confidentiality guidelines for the teams. Although the ESA was nowhere officially tasked with supporting the teams, the assistance it provided to them was a significant factor in promoting their success. The role filled by the ESA was similar to that identified by Barron (1983) as "the fixer," and suggested that attention to task needs to be complemented by attention to process.

While the tasks of formation were largely completed in six to eight months, structuring remained an ongoing concern. This observation pertained as equally to the six year old team as it did to the team just entering its second year. Negotiating agreement on the definition of roles and responsibilities was especially problematic. Despite these difficulties, the teams proceeded with their task of designing service plans for at-risk youth.

Outcomes

Communication. Improvement in the communication between schools and agencies was the most noted outcome of the YST process. Although most of the agencies worked with one another quite regularly, schools had remained outside the interagency communication network. The YST presented the first opportunity for schools to tap into that network. Both school and agency staff noted the difference it made in increasing the knowledge and understanding of organizations, the sharing of information about students, and the development of working relationships. A school

counselor commented, "Prior to the YST I knew the agencies were out there, but I didn't have as clear an understanding of who they are and the piece of the pie they work with." An agency team member explained:

> Those of us who have been around know everybody in every agency pretty much. It is this other facet we have never been hooked into, the school. Being able to use that expertise to deal with things you see in case loads is pretty exciting to me. We have never had that.

The increased communication had direct impact during the staffing of referred students and also had an impact on students who were not referred. The development of working relationships meant that school and agency personnel felt more comfortable talking to each other about cases. A law enforcement officer observed, "It is the personal relationships that get developed that are a real strength, and that affects kids not staffed at YST as well. People are more willing to respond and work together for all kids." A school counselor commented, "It is nice being on the team, because now I have someone I can call. It is a name, a connection. They know who you are, and that makes it easier to approach an agency."

The increased level of communication developed among team members did not extend to most other school and agency staff. With the exception of those who frequently brought referrals to the YST, other staff members did not have the experience of working across organizational boundaries on a regular basis. For them, the benefits of increased communication derived from the YST process were not directly noticeable.

Services for students and families. A second outcome of the collaborative efforts was that students and their families were helped to identify and gain access to needed community services. All of the teams could refer to many success stories. The YST process placed the student at the center of discussion, presenting an opportunity for their needs to be discussed from a community perspective and for a plan of service to be developed based on the input of many people, including the family.

Team members also pointed out that there were occasions when students were not well served, when resources were inadequate to meet needs. However, several team members remarked that even in those cases, the YST made a positive contribution in that it provided a public forum for discussing gaps in existing services and thus put pressure on the system to take action.

None of the teams tracked referred students for longer than a year, thus long-term impact of the YST action plans on student outcomes was not known. Evaluation of the teams' efficacy was subjective, based on opinions rather than supporting data.

Impact on systems. The YST process functioned outside of normal school and agency operations. It represented an alternate way to address the needs of at-risk youth that could be accessed by both schools and agencies, but it was not integral to their usual procedures, and for the most part, it did not change the fundamental way that schools and agencies provided services. The contribution of the YST lay in making more efficient use of existing systems.

Conclusion

Developing an integrated approach to service delivery is not an easy task despite the best intentions of the collaborators. There are no proven models to adopt and few guidelines to provide direction. By their very nature, school-agency collaborations are locally determined, shaped by the characteristics of local needs and the organizations that provide services. Even though the four YSTs that were the subject of this study followed the same basic staffing process, they differed in organizational membership, in the way they defined roles and responsibilities, and in the way members interacted with one another. Their experience cannot be generalized, but it does contribute to a growing data base on domain-focused, interorganizational collaboration from which generalizations may eventually be distilled.

The experience of these four rural collaborations supported many of the findings that have emerged from studies of school-agency collaboration conducted in urban areas. Conveners acted with

informal rather than formal authority, the importance of including all stakeholders early in the process was underscored, member organizations developed a shared vision statement, and one of the participating organizations took it upon itself to act as a facilitator, helping both with team building efforts and with team tasks. The necessity of operationalizing the shared vision by identifying goals and objectives and defining related roles and responsibilities was also demonstrated. Finally, the outcomes of increased communication among organizations and the provision of services to youth have also been found in previous studies.

In addition to confirming earlier findings, the experience of the YSTs raised some concerns not previously noted, but ones that warrant exploration. First, was a question regarding leadership. Discussions of leadership inevitably involve topics related to power, authority, and control; however, the predominate concern of YST members was the additional responsibility that was associated with leadership. No organization, with the exception of the schools, wanted to accept responsibility for coordinating the teams because it demanded an increased time commitment. The long-term implications of "leadership by default" have yet to be identified.

A second concern was the relationship between the voluntary nature of team participation and the accountability of members. Team members were not held accountable by their school or agency administrators for their YST participation, and the team coordinator had no authority over team members. Members more or less determined for themselves what they would contribute to the YST. The lack of accountability hampered consistency of effort and the equal sharing of responsibility, but the teams chose to address the issue only indirectly. How a locus of authority and a corresponding system for accountability can be built into a voluntary network needs further exploration.

A third concern, one that was closely related to the other two, was the failure of many of the participating organizations to understand the *cost* that in-kind contributions of personnel time represent. In too many instances, YST participation was added to full workloads, with no time

specifically dedicated to the YST. This hampered the ability of team members to carry out YST responsibilities and understandably made them unwilling to assume the additional duties of team coordinator. Organizations must realize that time is a crucial resource for successful collaboration, and it should not be expected to come out of the personal resources of the individual.

The YSTs demonstrated that a collaborative approach holds promise as a way to better serve at-risk youth. They also demonstrated that collaboration is a complex process, one that is initiated by gathering people around a table, but one that demands far greater commitment to effectively implement.

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